ASIFA EAST • The International Animated Film Society

aNYmator

Summer 2004

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ASIFA East

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A Program of the New York Foundation For The Arts

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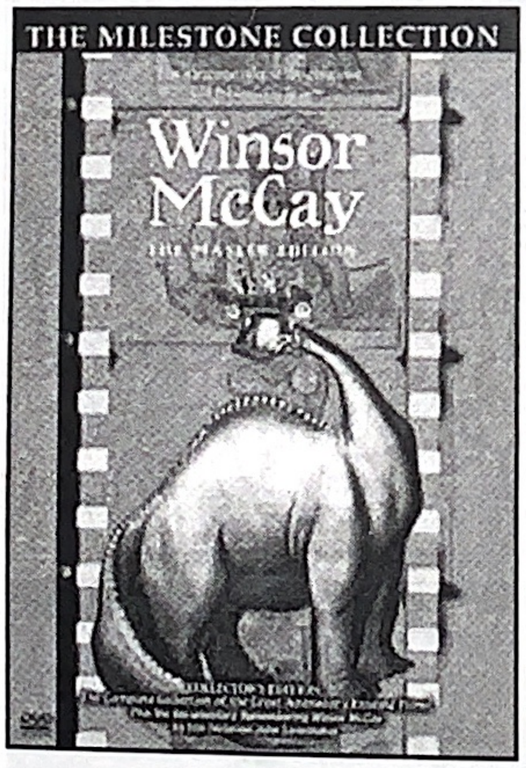


Just released!
Winsor McCay: The Master Edition

Winsor McCay was the first master of animation and one of its greatest and most influential artists. His films - joyous, hilarious and beautiful - continue to delight and astonish audiences today.

Milestone's **Winsor McCay: The Master Edition** features brand-new digital transfers of every surviving film by this cinema pioneer, a new piano score by composer Gabriel Thibaudeau, and John Canemaker's wonderful documentary Remembering Winsor McCay (1976, 18 minutes).

The Doos and Doh's of American Animation History:

In American Animation history the good seems to come with the bad. Sometimes its even hard to tell one from the other. The list will change that forever. Well, maybe not.. but, it was fun to write. Enjoy!...

Key: Yabba Dabba Doo! = good news.
Doh! = bad news.

Yabba Dabba Doo! In the 1890s, animation and live action film are born together.

Doh! Animation quickly becomes designated as a "trick film" or special effect.

Yabba Dabba Doo! In the 1910s, Windsor McCay develops fluid animation techniques and launches the idea of the independent animator making art films.

Doh! 1920s: Assembly line animation practices patented by Bray (and others) launch the commercial animation industry and toss aside many of the principals of animation discovered by those like McCay....

Yabba Dabba Doo! Those same assembly line practices ensure that Animation as a profession is born!

Yabba Dabba Doo! Between 1930s-1947, animated short subjects, while not profitable in and of themselves, are in demand as part of pre-sold packages to theaters (including live action shorts, serials, newsreels, and live action features). Most major Hollywood studios (MGM, Warner Bros., Columbia) create their own animation studios.

Yabba Dabba Doo! 1937: Disney risks all and launches the animated feature as a profitable commercial venture with the release of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

Doh! No other studio can afford to compete with Disney and make the leap to expensive feature production. The sole exception is the Fleischer brothers who are able to produce two features, just before losing control of their studio to Paramount.

Doh! In 1947, the Supreme court breaks up the Hollywood studio system, destroying the market for animated short subjects in the process. The theatrical animated short subject dies a slow death between 1947 and the mid 1960s.

Yabba Dabba Doo! During the golden age of theatrical cartoons, animation is made with a mixed audience in mind (children, teens and adults) and is appreciated by most theatergoers.

Doh! 1950s: The birth of television exiles animation primarily to kids TV for a forty year period! The widespread notion that cartoons are just for kids is born.

Yabba Dabba Doo! In the early days of TV, old animation libraries (from the likes of such studios as Van Bueren and Terry Toons) become valuable again as old cartoons are packaged into half hour blocks of programming.

Yabba Dabba Doo! The golden age of TV commercial animation begins by 1950. Jobs working on commercials are plentiful and the animation studios exert much creative control over the commercials themselves.

Doh! By the 1960s, the Ad agencies rest creative control away from the animation studios and set up their own in-house art directors to handle the creative. This coincides with the amount of production of animated commercials slowing down.

Doh! Many Animation legends reach retirement age by the 1960s, risking that the secrets of their craft will go with them. In these waning days of the industry, less people enter the field, resulting in a lost (or missing) generation of animators.

Yabba Dabba Doo! Late 1960s: The age of the independent animated filmmaker is born as films find release in art houses and film festivals the world over.

Doh! The 1970s, despite the emergence of maverick filmmaker Ralph Bakshi, sees the industry reach another low point as many TV animation jobs get exported overseas.

Yabba Dabba Doo! Late 1970s: Video games are introduced in the arcades and homes of America. The new industry of video game animation is created.

Doh! By the 1980s, toy companies dominate the industry as most TV animation is framed around toys and games. Programming suffers.

Yabba Dabba Doo! The creation of more channels due to the rise of cable TV means a new golden age is born for animated station IDs, promos, and advertising.

Yabba Dabba Doo! Late 1980s: Roger Rabbit, The Simpsons, the rise of creator driven programming, and the Disney renaissance (starting with The Little Mermaid) bring forth a new boom in toons. Adults start to watch animation again.

Doh! Fearless TV execs and studio heads rush to cash in on this, spending gobs of money on failed programs and features.

Yabba Dabba Doo! Many animation artists can earn a living (for a few years) because of the "Doh!", above.

Yabba Dabba Doo! Mid 1990s: Pixar leads the way in 3D animated features with its successful string of strong audience pleasing films.

Yabba Dabba Doo! 1997: South Park and King of The Hill initiate a second wave of modern prime time TV animation catering to adult audiences.

Doh! Fearless TV execs, creators, and studio heads rush to cash in on the above, spending gobs of money on failed programs that focus on shock vale while eliminating the "heart" (and the FUNNY) of the shows they're copying.

Yabba Dabba Doo! Many animation artists can get their light boxes out of hock because of the "Doh!", above.

Yabba Dabba Doo! The age of digital animation brings some animation jobs (lost to the US since the 1970s) back to the states.

Yabba Dabba Doo! The internet becomes the next animation frontier with original programming emerging for the first time on the web.

Doh! 2000: Internet animation goes bust with the falling stock market. Web animation all but dries up.

Doh! Schools graduate an all time high number of animation students right as the animation industry sinks into one of its worst job markets in memory.

Yabba Dabba Doo! CGI features and effects work grow by leaps and bounds as the public's appetite for 3D animation seems insatiable.

Doh! The media (and Jeffrey Katzenberg) declare 2D animation dead.

Yabba Dabba Doo! The Triplets of Belleville begs to differ....

Un-'Limited' By Imagination

By Brian Mitchell

In Walt Disney's 1970 Motion Picture The Aristocats, there is a scene where A group of cats are walking over a railroad trestle, when an ongoing train approaches. The cats quickly duck for cover underneath the tracks as the barreling freight train passes by. Three shots of the cats show them cowering in fear from the passing train, but none of these scenes has any actual animation in it. The work of the cameraman is at work here where a simple effect, moving the peg bars on the animation stand, produces the desired effect. Loud railroad sound effects combine with the picture completes the scene. Very effective stuff.

I used to think that all of Disneys films utilized full animation in every shot. Of course, as I studied these films closer, it wasn't always the case.

Many times Disney used simple effects or limited animation to create a scene. He wasn't looking to spend money, he was looking for the most effective way to do things. When I worked for Don Bluth, we did some very nice animation, very nice animation indeed...for some very well animated movies. It's too bad the stories weren't more interesting or fun. I'd rather watch something with a fresh story and super limited animation than a bland classical animated movie anytime.

Recently, Rocky & Bullwinkle, (the first season of episodes were released on DVD), and watching them was a revelation to me. It's not that I haven't enjoyed seeing Rocky & Bullwinkle before, it's just that after watching the DVD's, (four of them in fact), over a two day marathon of Jay Ward hilarity, I realized that most of these cartoons have some of worst animation and drawings ever to come out of the animation industry. I mean, I always knew the drawings were bad, but not this bad. In the actual episodes, there's plenty of missing cels, sloppy motion and paint mistakes. The sound is sometimes scratchy, camera moves are jerky and the colors look kind of muddy.

However, while all this had really awful animation and lousy production values, all these years I never really noticed those horrible problems because the content of the stories was absolutely wonderful. Well, what do you know? Story really is king. Not that I've never known that. It's been drilled into my head since my teens. But no where is this important point made more apparent than in Rocky & Bullwinkle.

In 1969, Rankin/Bass Produced a holiday special about Frosty The Snowman that has consistently delivered top ratings for years on CBS. It features little full animation and sometimes the poses are downright wooden, but the story is simple and to the point. The production is uncluttered and the simple designs of the characters (By Paul Coker) and the backgrounds, lend a feeling of charm to the show. Could fuller animation have added something to the show? Sometimes I wonder. I've enjoyed this show every year that it's been on the air.

There's great lessons to be learned here by these limited animation productions.

Oh, and BTW, one of my favorite animated features is Snoopy Come Home, a very limited animated feature film.

Brian Mitchell is a traditionally trained character animator who has worked on dozens of television shows, features and pilots for the last 20 years. He is currently doing story sketch work on a brand new CG animated Feature Film. His hobbies are all involved with living and breathing animation.

Talk about someone needing to get a life!

You may contact Brian through his email address *mitchellprods@aol.com*.

Bill Plympton, The Long Island Film Festival, and Me

By Christopher Cooke

I'm not really sure how and when I met filmaker/animator Bill Plympton. But I think our first contact was at the Ft. Lauderdale Fest in 1991...Bill and I both received "Golden Coconuts" for the films we were representing! I had become aware of Bill's bizarre, short animated works in the late 80's when amazing shorts like "Your Face", "How to Kiss", and "25 Ways to stop Smoking" hit the fest circuit including my Long Island Film Festival, which had its first screenings in 1984.

Although the LIFF screened animation from the beginning, it was not until Plympton's work showed up that animation became an important part of the program. One of the first native filmakers associated with the LIFF was L.I. auteur Hal Hartley. I had the good fortune to be associated with Hartley through screening his early short films and then becoming part of his "acting ensemble" in films such as "The Unbelievable Truth", "Trust", and "Simple Men". Hartley's success inspired a lot of independent filmakers, including Bill Plympton.

Although we had spoken by phone regarding screening his films it was not until one cold february night that we were to meet again...almost. I had been invited to appear in a stage reading of a screenplay at a tiny theatre on White street in Tribeca. The heat that night was off! The water in the toilet bowls were frozen solid! The actors and audience alike could see their frozen breath in the air around the stage! I was bundled up in a long wool coat and a funky cossack hat (which I believe kept me from getting pneumonia). Anyway I strutted the stage in a military posture attempting to keep from freezing in place during the duration of the reading. When it was over, a cast party was held at a bar around the corner which Plympton attended expecting to me me there.

I went directly home from the theatre but Bill called me the next day and said he'd like me to "audition" for his next animated feature project "I Married a Strange Person". I was flattered and we made a date to meet at his studio. When I arrived I didn't know what to expect. Bill's home/loft/studio was long and narrow and fairly spartan. When we started talking about the project he said he had been impressed with my "body language" at the "reading" and was considering me for the role of the "General" in his film. He had me read a few "sides" from the script and said he needed me to come back again so that he could video tape my "actions" that he could translate to his drawing style. I noticed during our "interview" that Bill never stopped drawing!..not while on the phone...dictating memos..or speaking to me! He was always drawing!

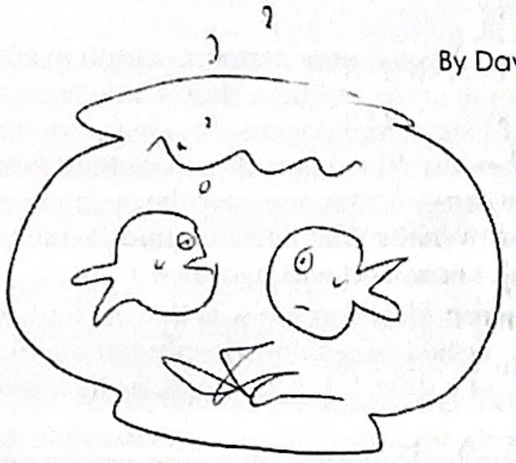
Anyway a while later I hauled in a few props and military type costume stuff and visited Bill's studio for the video taping. It was a very hot summer day and the studio was hot too. Especially when Bill turned on the "lights" for his video camera recording. We spent a couple of hours trying different movements for the camera...with my general's jacket,hat, and boots becoming hotter and heavier with every "take". As I was leaping and marching around Bill'd loft I felt more and more like a fool. The high price of Art! But the fact was I knew whatever Bill did would turn to creative "gold". He was a real genius. And I knew it.

Quite a few months passed before we spoke again. He was out "on tour" promoting his films. We screened his firat live-action film "J. Lyle" and the following season his quirky "Guns on the Clackamas at the LIFF.

Finally almost two years after my "audition" it was time to do the "voices" for the characters. I had done some "voice over dubbing before...but this was quite different. Bill gave very specific direction...and line readings and did "take" after "take" after "take"! When the day was over I was glad to have finished my first Bill Plympton project. The film itself was completed nine months later and screened at SUNDANCE. We screened it at the LIFF on the huge 40 foot screen at Stony Brook's Staller Center. The finished project was - as ever - brilliant!

Christopher Cooke is the founding producer of the Long island Film Festival. As an actor he has performed in over 20 films and television projects. For info on the LIFF '04 go to *www.lifilm.org*, e-mail *suffolkfilm@yahoo.com*, phone *631-669-2717*. The LIFF will feature animation from award winner Signe Baumane (Women), Johnnie Semerad (Josh W.), Masayo Nishimura, and Douglas Dillworth.

By David B. Levy



"I have to warn you...I'm not much of a conversationalist."

Extremes and In-Betweens: Separating the Doers from the Dreamers

By Richard Gorey

This is a tough column to write for me. In the beginning, a month or two ago, I was going to try to compose something inspirational for those young people out there who may be job-hunting in the industry. I'd heard several people expressing frustration about animation and their possible career path, and, being Rich Gorey, I really wanted to leave something uplifting in their experience, as is my custom.

But when I started asking people for insight, input, and opinions…boy, did they deliver. I suppose it was a case of "be careful what you ask for, because you might get it."

And yet, everything I heard was of value to me: it was as if the top of my head was blown off, and some new thought was able to get in. I pass these insights along for those who may find them useful, but unlike many of the other columns I've written, this one may be a little tough to take.

We all know the industry is suffering, and jobs are hard to come by. We've covered this topic in the newsletter from several perspectives. There are many reasons for this down-turn (also covered in great detail). But it seems as if I've been neglecting (or perhaps avoiding) another important issue.

We talk a lot about what the industry can and can't do for those aspiring to a career in animation, but what about those people themselves? If it is so hard to find a job…should it be?

Yes, animation is competitive, especially lately. People who once had series of their own are now competing for the entry level jobs, and that…well, that really sucks. But who are they competing against? Every industry is competitive: I should know- I've had jobs in several other arenas. But not all competition is bad. In fact, sometimes, it's good to have to rise to a certain skill level.

Remember when you were that kid in your high school who could draw well? Then you got to college and it was, "Oh, God. EVERYONE can do this- and some much better than I." That happened to me, and it forced me to work much harder to come up to the level of draftsmanship that surrounded me. I managed, and I loved animation, and boy, did I work at it. Some things I did better than other people, some not nearly so well. But I wanted it badly…it was my dream…and so naturally, the world would deliver, and it would come to me.

I knew every line from every Bugs Bunny cartoon…could even tell you where the cels were mis-aligned in some of the wartime shorts. I dished cattily on how badly animated some portions of Heavy Metal were. I made fun of how only the mouths moved in Scooby Doo. When my friend and classmate Matt Novak was interviewed by the Disney people (who came to SVA one year) he even knew the answer to their insipid, irrelevant question, "What's Walt Disney's middle name?" (He knew it was Elias, and he got in. I didn't know, and was banished.)

But the real difference between Matt and me was this: he had real TALENT. Real, hard-earned, no-bullshit, polished-to-a-shine, deeply-felt talent. I had perkiness, charm, a sense of humor, and a dream. It's as simple as this: Matt was qualified, and I wasn't. Period.

Lately, I've seen perhaps hundreds of films by young people who have the same dream. Some of these works blew me away: I was stunned by the sophistication and elegance of their technique, and moved by the storytelling. I also saw some films

created by people who I recognized as younger versions of myself. These were not without their charm, but they were clumsily animated, poorly-conceived, and the work of interested amateurs. Hats off to anyone who even FINISHES a film (even a bad one) but a nice pat on the back may be all these people deserve- not the reward of a six-figure job in an industry that demands perfection most of the time, and requires a commitment few are willing to make- or even imagine.

When I asked around for some help on this column, as I said, I got it- but in unexpected ways. Yvette Kaplan told me, in her usual gentle, friendly way, "Maybe it SHOULD be hard to compete. How else does the best rise to the top, in any industry?" She's got something there. I wonder if some of those out there who are finding the doors closed to them have asked themselves the tough questions. Those questions would be:

"Have I done all I know how to do? Have I learned Maya, Flash, and After Effects, and am I proficient in any of them? How many hours a week am I spending, honing my craft? Is seeing every new Disney film and being able to comment on it enough? Sure, I hated Sinbad…but could I have done better, really? Is my thesis film an asset…or a liability? Have my mentors been of value to me? Are my salary goals unrealistic?" And the biggest one of all, a life changing, mind-altering question for the individual soul: "Why am I doing this?"

Trevor Wooley, who I met through David Levy, has been an animator. Like me, he found his true calling as a writer, but for a while, he worked on Nickelodeon's Blues Clues. He speaks from the trenches, and said this:

"Somewhere along the line, we were told 'You can do anything you want, as long as you dream it. And that's what we've got. Dreamers, dreaming of Disney jobs and six-figure salaries, and a life of drawing funny pictures. There's no sense of working for it or earning it, or building talent to achieve it. We're convinced no one in this day and age should have to work for their money, because there's so much fun out there. We should play for our money…and let's face it- from fifty feet away, this LOOKS like play."

He's right, isn't he? For decades, young (and old) people, have been sold a public-relations lie that a career in animation involves sitting in a well-appointed drawing room, making funny faces in a mirror, and screening the dailies in a private theater. I suppose sometimes, but very rarely, it is. But ask people like Michael Sporn and Howard Beckerman, and Candy Kugel, and Linda Simensky, and John Dilworth. They'll tell you the real truth, as only they can. It's deadlines, and low budgets, and clients who don't get it, and administrators who don't care for animation- except as a means to an end.

For years, I truly believed I would leave the world something as grand and glorious as "One Hundred and One Dalmatians". I saw this film as a child, and it spoke to something deep within me. I knew, I was CERTAIN, that someday I would direct a film like it. "That's what I want to do with my life," I said, and everyone in my family identified me with that dream. I recall some of them, meaning well, telling me, "It's a competitive business, Rich, and frankly, you don't have what it takes."

"Fools", I thought. "I'll show them. Wait'll they see how wrong they've been about me."

Well they were, and they weren't. When I hit my thirties, it occurred to me: I was so far from the place that might make that dream a reality I couldn't even SEE it from where I was. I was discouraged and bitter. I was getting older, and I saw the dream of leaving something wonderful behind evaporate. Maybe some of you can relate. But then a funny thing happened. I'd been writing for a while, and a story I'd written became a longer story, then a short novel, then a real novel, with illustrations I did by myself. Someone read it, and said, "Rich, this is the '101 Dalmatians' of the

new generation," and it hit me: Oh God, it isn't going to be a film, it's going to be a BOOK!

I pass along this story to all the hundreds, perhaps thousands out there, who find themselves wondering why the hell they got into animation in the first place. When I spoke recently at David Levy's thesis class at SVA, I encountered several students who were in total panic mode. They hated their films, and were terrified that they had thrown away a hundred thousand dollars of their parents' money on something they no longer felt a passion for, or a kinship with. I repeated my strange career metamorphosis to them, and they were comforted by it. One student, a bright and talented girl, felt her film wasn't up to the level of professionalism it should have been. I suggested she might not really be enjoying the "animation" part of animation, and that she might take her genuinely charming characters and turn them into a panel strip. This simple suggestion was a revelation to her. It had never occurred to her that there might be another option, or another life for the characters she'd created. Not everyone who loves animation is destined for a career in the business. I love action thrillers, but that doesn't mean I'm qualified to be the next Schwarzennegger.*

I encourage everyone out there who reads this column to ask themselves: am I suited to this career? Do I have something to say? Do I just love animation, or do I really want to devote my life to this profession? (And by the way, you can love something and not do it for a living. I have a friend, Noreen, who's a skilled painter and seamstress. She has never earned a dime off her art, but you should see her HOUSE: it's a stunning testament to her creativity and her imagination. She's used her considerable talents to surround herself- and her family- with beauty. No one could call Noreen a failure, and no one does.)

Sometimes, I think the best thing I ever did for animation was to get out of it. I may not have left many remarkable films behind, but I think I can do much more for the industry by writing this column, and creating a forum for a debate. It's okay if people disagree with what I write…but if something I say inspires a thought, or a film, or encourages someone to re-think an issue that's troubling them, my work here is done. Some people have asked me why I don't just become a film critic. I always say it's because film criticism, by its nature, is about tearing down the achievements of others who've had the guts to create what you yourself are unable to. I'd rather tell my own stories, even in book form, than criticize work that's already finished, or spend my life writing about what OTHER people have accomplished.

How many of us out there find ourselves doing the same thing? How often do we see something in the theaters, and cut it to ribbons afterwards? How many of us smirk at films we KNOW we could do better? Okay now: how often have any of us done this to OUR OWN work? How many of those people out there who've been shut out from that job have looked objectively at their films- and really seen what needs improvement?

You've all been to the festivals, just as I have. Everyone's got that drive (you have to, to have the stamina to finish a film) but do they have what it takes? From the safety of a theater seat, we're all experts. But if you had to run your film next to the best that's out there…how would it fare?

I worked for eighteen years at Young & Rubicam, where I worked on countless animations over the years, for clients such as The Gap, Philip Morris, Kraft, Citibank, and People Magazine. I even supervised a team of freelancers and designed several pitches for other major clients. But there wasn't anything in that eighteen years that made my heart sing or that I even kept for my portfolio. That says something.

A hundred thousand dollars is an awful lot of money to spend on an education. But, sadly, that doesn't qualify many people for a career. That may be hard to hear, but

it's true, all the same. I spoke to one student recently who had a desire to be a writer. Four years of animation schooling had taught him one thing: he HATED animation. He hated doing the drawings, over and over, he hated the grind of it, the routine of it, the back strain and the eyestrain. He wanted to be a writer, and was terrified to tell his parents this. What would they say? Would they be furious with him? HOW could he tell them? I had a moment of secret affection for the guy: it was his own "coming out" story- and don't think it wasn't just as hard to come to terms with this. But I told him; very few of his classmates would become animators either. And that's the lesson I'd like to share here. When I asked his class, "Show of hands: how many of you see yourselves sitting at a drawing table three years from now, animating?" all forty hands went up. I explained that while I hoped they got what they wanted, that "what they wanted" might change over time, and that there are so many careers in animation for those who are interested: writer, storyboard artist, character designer, producer, voice-over artist, director, color stylist. The list goes on and on. Animation is a VERY specialized skill. In a way, it IS a calling, though I hate to use that word. Some people are suited to it. Most aren't.

Life is unfair. This is a hard truth, but a useful one, in the end. Once you know this, you can work around it. Okay, the industry is tough, and the jobs aren't out there…at least, for everyone who wants them. But in my experience, not having a job in animation doesn't keep me from enjoying it, or pursuing these little films on my own. If you really DO love something, you'll find a way to express it: remember my friend Noreen. You may not do it for money, but you'll do it.

As Trevor Wooley said, "I think the deeper questions are motivations. How does th fulfill you? How does it assign meaning? Find out how [animation] moves your soul. How it cleanses you. What is your voice?"

A career- ANY career- is a privilege, not a birthright. There seems to be a belief in today's society (especially in this country) that we're OWED the things we dream of having, somehow. There's nothing wrong with dreaming. That's how all realities start. But to thrive (or even survive) in animation takes more than the dream- even more than the talent. It takes an understanding of the odds, and a willingness to work VERY HARD to find a place at the table. For those who do, I salute you.

For the others, don't be angry or disappointed for too long. Go inside, find that spark again, and follow it to wherever it leads…whether that's animation or something else.

*I was going to write, "I like porn, too, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna be the next John Holmes"… but I thought that would scare people.

We're living in India now, and have been since December. Richard is the consultant for the planning and development of The Cancer Institute at the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences in Cochin, Kerala, and Chief of Radiation Oncology for Head and Neck Malignancies. I am writing *Mona Mon Amour*, the novel. But above all, we're in love with India, the children, and the elephant rides! And we're missing all of you here!

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Boulton Center for the Arts
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Port Washington Media Center
October 11 & 25

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